

An Overview of Organic Pork Production

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Factsheet

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INTRODUCTION

The principle goal of organic production is to develop enterprises that are sustainable and harmonious with the environment⁽¹⁾. Organic production is a holistic system designed to optimize the productivity and fitness of diverse communities within the agro-ecosystem, including soil organism, plants, livestock and people⁽¹⁾.

Organic food is still a niche category in Canada, representing approximately 2% of the total Canadian food dollar spent on food products⁽²⁾. However, this is growing at a fast pace, both in Canada and in other parts of the world. The value of organic food products sold in Canada through all retail channels was estimated at \$2 billion in 2008 — a growth of 66% over 2006⁽²⁾.

One of the driving forces behind the fast growth of the organic food market is increased public concern over the safety and quality of foods produced from conventional food production systems. Organic foods are perceived by some consumers as being safer for consumption, better in nutrition and healthier than foods produced by conventional production. Among the other reasons given for buying organic are:

- organic food production is better for the environment
- organic food tastes better
- consumers want to try new products

While most of these claims remain to be proven, more consumers are purchasing organic foods.

The market and demand for organic pork in Canada are growing, providing opportunities for the pork industry. In 2006, certified organic meat sales were less than 1% of total organic food sales, but in 2008, meat became one of the fastest-growing categories in organic products, accounting for approximately \$2 million in sales⁽²⁾.

ORGANIC PORK PRODUCTION IN ONTARIO

It is estimated that there are about 45 certified organic pork producers in Ontario with a total annual production of about 24,000 market hogs. The majority of the certified organic hogs produced in Ontario are marketed to a single processor in Quebec. Current information shows that, in Ontario, certified organic pork operations range in size from 5 to 300+ sows farrow to finish.

ORGANIC PORK STANDARDS

Through a consultative process with industry stakeholders, the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) has developed Canadian standards for organic agriculture. Aligned with organic standards published in the U.S. and Europe, *Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards* includes guidelines for organic pork producers and provides the basis for certification. In December 2006, Canada first published these regulations. In June 2008, they were approved, allowing organic producers an implementation period of 3 years to transition to the new standards.

In June 2011, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) began enforcing the standards. A Canadian Organic Office has been established, and the CFIA will provide oversight to the process of certifying organic farms and products across the country. Certified products may carry the official Canada Organic logo on their labels.



ORGANIC PORK CERTIFICATION

To be able to label and market pork as organic, nationally or internationally, producers must have their operation certified by a certifying body. Not all certifying bodies provide certification services to pork producers.

Some certifying bodies are associated with or accredited by other international organic certifying bodies or organizations. Under the new regulations, all accredited certifying bodies must adhere to the Canadian organic standard as the minimum requirement for all organic certification agencies in Canada.

Contact a certifying body for further information on production standards, program requirements and marketing of the products before starting the transition to organic pork. A listing of some of the agencies that conduct certification of organic foods in Ontario as well as some organizations associated with organic food can be found in the Infosheet *Organic Food and Farming Certification*, available on the OMAFRA website.

ORGANIC PORK FARM INSPECTIONS

All certification bodies require an inspection of farms in the year prior to achieving certification status and annual or semi-annual inspections in following years. Like the Canadian Quality Assurance (CQA®) Program, organic pork production requires producers to document all production activities and keep records to prove that they are following specific standards and rules.

TRANSITION TIME TO ORGANIC

The transition time — the time required to switch an operation from conventional pork production to organic pork production — can be as short as 12 months and as long as 3 years, depending on whether the producer will be growing the organic feed as well. Transition time is a major hurdle for converting conventional pork production to organic pork production, because hogs can't be marketed as organic during this period, even though they must be raised according to the organic production standards.

Table 1. Organic pig stocking rates

	Indoor Space	Outdoor Runs and Pens
Sows and piglets (up to 40 days old)	7.5 m ² for each sow and litter	Not required
Growing pigs		
a. up to 30 kg	0.6 m ² /head	0.4 m ² /head
b. 30–50 kg	0.8 m ² /head	0.6 m ² /head
c. 50–85 kg	1.1 m ² /head	0.8 m ² /head
d. >85 kg	1.3 m ² /head	1.0 m ² /head
Sows in group pens	3 m ² /head	3 m ² /head
Boars in individual pens	9 m ² /head	9 m ² /head

Source: *Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards*. Canadian General Standards Board. Government of Canada. Amended in October 2008, December 2009 and June 2011. CAN/CGSB-32.310-2006

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ORGANIC PORK PRODUCTION

Living and Housing Conditions

Generally, all facilities used to raise pigs must meet their normal socialization, feeding and living requirements. This includes providing sufficient space (Table 1) and regular access to outdoors, sunlight and fresh air, as permitted by weather conditions. A certified organic operation cannot house pigs on 100% slatted floors, in dry sow stalls or in farrowing crates and must provide dry bedding materials such as straw or wood shavings — from organic sources, if available.

Pigs raised under the organic standards must have access to outdoor exercise areas, shade, shelter, rotational pasture, exercise areas, fresh air and natural daylight suitable to the species, its stage of production, the climate and the environment. Access to pasture is recommended but not mandatory. However, any pasture the pigs use must be managed to avoid soil degradation, long-term damage to the vegetation or water contamination. Outdoor areas for pigs can also include woodlands or other natural environments, in which case the same guidelines regarding pasture management apply.

The operator of an organic livestock operation may provide temporary confinement for livestock owing to one of the following:

- inclement weather
- conditions where the health, safety or well-being of the animal could be jeopardized, given its stage of production
- risks relating to soil, water or plant quality

Breeds and Breeding

Take the following into account when selecting breeds of pigs for organic production systems:

- adaptation of livestock to local conditions
- vitality and resistance of livestock to disease
- absence of disease and health problems specific to breeds

Natural breeding (breeding gilts or sows using boars) is preferred, although artificial insemination (AI) is permitted. Embryo transplants and breeding techniques using genetic engineering or related technology are not allowed. The use of injectable reproductive hormones to trigger and synchronize estrus is also prohibited from use.

Pig Sources

To meet current organic standards, pigs must be:

- born from certified organic production units, or
- have been born from parents raised under the organic production standards, and
- raised in an organic production system throughout their lives

An exception is livestock used for meat: they must be under continuous organic management from the beginning of the last third of the gestation period (38 days) of the sows.

Additionally, breeding stock must come from organic operations. If organic breeding stock is not available, non-gestating gilts and breeding boars from a non-organic operation may be integrated into the organic system. However, these breeding animals must be raised as organic for 12 months or more in order to be resold as organic breeding stock.

Health

Disease prevention is the first line of defence in an organic animal health strategy. Good animal husbandry practices, including appropriate choice of breeds, housing conditions, space allowance, sanitation practises and prompt treatment will result in a high level of animal health. Vaccinations are only allowed when the targeted diseases are communicable and cannot be controlled by other means. When pigs become sick or injured in spite of preventive measures, they must be treated and isolated.

Due to the requirement for outdoor access, organic pork operations must have a comprehensive plan to minimize

parasite problems. The plan must include preventive measures such as outdoor access management and fecal monitoring, as well as emergency measures in the event of a parasite outbreak. Should preventive measures fail, organic pork producers may use parasiticides not listed in the *Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances List⁽³⁾* provided that:

- observation of the livestock or fecal sample indicates infection with parasites
- the producer has received written instructions from a veterinarian indicating the product and method for parasite control
- withdrawal times shall be twice the label requirement or 14 days, whichever is longer
- there shall be only one treatment for slaughter animals under 1 year old, and
- the producer provides a written action plan (including timing), describing amendments to the parasite control plan that will avoid similar emergencies

Treatment of pigs with specific medicines is allowed and recommended. These medicines are subject to the standards and approval of the certifying body. However, the use of synthetic antibiotics is prohibited for animals designated for organic pork. The producer must record all treatments, such as animal identification numbers, substance name, dosage, dates and duration of the treatment and the results, in detail.

The standards permit castration and other surgical treatments, such as tagging, of the pigs at the youngest age possible to avoid any undue animal suffering. The standards prohibit tail-docking and cutting of teeth unless required for herd safety and health.

When preventive practices and veterinary biologics are inadequate to prevent or treat sickness, the well-being of the animal must be protected. All appropriate medications, including the use of drugs that are not acceptable to organic production, must be used. Pigs treated with prohibited substances, such as synthetic antibiotics, at any stage of the production must be removed from organic herds or permanently identified and cannot be marketed as organic pork. Treating pregnant sows with medications or veterinary biologics within the first two-thirds of pregnancy may be allowed, however, the meat from these treated animals cannot be marketed as organic nor can the sows be sold as organic breeding stock.

Feed and Water

Organic feed shall consist of substances that are necessary and essential for maintaining the pigs' health, well-being and vitality and meet the physiological and behavioural needs of the pigs. This includes the need for roughage and fresh/dried fodder or silage in the daily ration. All feed ingredients used must be certified as being produced, handled and processed in accordance with the standard specified by the certifying body. Pig diets must not include feed medications, growth promoters, lactation promoters, synthetic appetite enhancers, animal by-products, preservation agents, colouring agents and genetically engineered or modified organisms (GMOs) or their products. For information on substances permitted in organic pig diets, check the *Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances Lists*⁽³⁾.

Transport and Handling

Producers must handle pigs humanely and responsibly according to provincial and federal laws, regulations or guidelines and the requirements set by the certifying body. Pigs should be transported and handled to minimize stress, injury and suffering. This can be accomplished by using direct, short transportation routes and providing bedding and suitable shelter against inclement weather conditions. The use of electrical stimulation or calming drugs is prohibited. Pigs too ill to be transported are to be humanely euthanized.

Other Requirements

There are other requirements included in organic standards guidelines, such as manure management, pest management and parasite control that should also be considered.

SUMMARY

Consumer demand for organic pork is rising. Some pork producers may wish to capture part of this niche market. The information on organic pork requirements presented here is only a general overview. For detailed information, see Canada's *Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards*⁽³⁾ or contact a certifying body that meets your needs for production and marketing. Organic pork production takes time, hard work, and facility and management changes to meet all the requirements. Thoroughly research the requirements for organic pork production to determine whether this type of production system is appropriate for your operation. Organic production is not for all pork producers.

ENDNOTES

1. *Organic Production Systems — General Principles and Management Standards*. Canadian General Standards Board. Government of Canada. Amended in October 2008, December 2009 and June 2011. CAN/CGSB-32.310-2006.
2. *Organic Food and Farming Certification*. Infosheet. OMAFRA, 2002.
3. *Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances Lists*. Canadian General Standards Board. Government of Canada. Amended in October 2008, December 2009 and June 2011. CAN/CGSB-32.311-2006.

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